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An Equivocal World: Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*

Masahide Kaneda

Oscar Wilde's dramas reject a single interpretation: they offer the antithetical interpretability without privileging either. When Eagleton numerates the characteristics of Wilde who is in his view "a postmodernist *avant la lettre*," he mentions Wilde's "belief that interpretation is endless" (335), which I think is projected in his dramas. However, most of the critics up to the present have tried to interpret his dramas in a definitive way. As a consequence, their criticisms have not a few defects.

Against such a penchant for interpreting Wilde's dramas in a definitive way, a few critics have an insight into their equivocal nature. Regenia Gagnier positively admits the contradictory elements in Wilde's works, and seeing the close relationships between Wilde and the consumerist society, she shows his manipulation of the audience and the critics and then two interpretability his dramas basically have: "The sentimental interpretation allowed Society to love the playwright who mocked it, and the cynical or satiric interpretation allowed the reviewers to see that his sentimentality was mere a form of ingratiating" (106). Another critic who admits incoherency in Wilde's dramas is Kerry Powell. Comparing Wilde's dramas with other numerous contemporary dramas and literary works in detail, his comprehensive study indicates that the first three acts of his dramas imitate some popular theatrical types, but in the final act "Wilde overcomes the

force of his predecessors and reverses in his own play the important tendencies of statement and character in theirs" (4), suggesting that his dramas, especially as to their plots, essentially lack unity in a sense.

Michael Patrick Gillespie is also one of the recent critics who actively focuses his attention on ambiguity in Wilde's oeuvre. Recognising the influence of the middle-class audience (and readers), he shows "the interpretive multiplicities inherent in Wilde's canon, where passages evolve in a fashion that sustains several equally plausible meanings while privileging none" (14), the opinion I quite agree with and thereby intend to analyse the dialogicality in *An Ideal Husband* in detail. These three critics, in their respective ways, indicate that in Wilde's dramas lie some inconsistency and multi-interpretability. This might be demonstrated by the fact that the interpretations by Nassaar and Cohen are quite contrary to each other: the former detects the theme of evil in the dramas, whereas the latter finds out there that of the Christian mercy.

The myth of Wilde has influenced many critics, causing even the text-oriented analyses to have some jaundiced viewpoints. Releasing his texts from such a myth is what is needed to make them interpretable appropriately: as the texts to offer diverse interpretability. Wilde's dramas are composed of a mixture of the various disruptive elements. Through the analysis of *An Ideal Husband* as an exemplary text, I will illuminate in this paper indeterminacy in the drama on the level of the plot, showing an equivocal world it embodies.

*An Ideal Husband*¹ is framed up with ambiguity. One of its factors can be traced to the indeterminacy the drama reveals when some incidents are raised with presentation of the choices. Surely the drama offers the problematical binary

opposition between the public and the domestic, life of men and that of women, yet it is not constructed as conferring the privilege on the one against the other.

Let me begin the textual analysis in detail with one of the thematic scenes concerning Robert's blame for his wife's idealisation of him. Confronted with Lady Chiltern's censure of him for his degenerating from the position as her ideal, Robert, taking the offensive against her, declares:

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

There was your mistake. There was your error. The error all women commit. Why can't you love us, faults and all? . . . when we men love women, we love them knowing their weakness, their follies, their imperfections, love them all the more, it may be, for that reason. . . . Women think that they are making ideals of men. What they are making of us are false idols merely. . . . I had not the courage . . . to tell you my weakness. . . . Let women make no more ideals of men! (85; act 2)

As Powell indicates, "the late Victorian stage is crowded with Sir Robert Chilterns" (90), the characters placed upon a monstrous pedestal by the women who love them. If one takes into account the underlying historical discourse about men and women in the Victorian age when angel-like women were confined in the domestic area without meddling in men's behaviour, Robert's blame could be sustained easily to some extent, though radical Shaw finds the "modern note" (177) in this assertion regarding it as the criticism of idealism in general. Lady Chiltern's character, too, might make this censure valid, as she does not seem to have gained the sympathy from most of the drama's first critics: she was described as "stupidly good," "rather trying," "abnormally moral," and even "unwomanly,"² all of which more or less register the sexual discourse

I have just mentioned. A part of the text also clearly inscribes such a male dominant ideology. After he left the room, the stage directions say of Lady Chiltern: "*Pale with anguish, bewildered, helpless, she sways like a plant in the water. Her hands, out-stretched, seem to tremble in the air like blossoms in the wind. . . . Her sobs are like the sobs of a child*" (85; act 2). The image of plants and a child emphasises her weakness, innocence, and moreover ignorance: she is depicted as an ill-informed woman inferior to her husband, by which Robert's assertion gets to have more verity. However, it is framed up in the manner of evasion of responsibility and of self-justification. At this time, he calls his misdeed as what his "weakness" has brought about contrasted to his salient statement before that he did his misdeed by "strength and courage" (55; act 2). The contradiction between his view on his wife as "perfect" (50; act 2) and the one in this scene that men love women with "their imperfection" also adds to this speech suspicion for his abominable self-interest. He himself has "worship [ped]" (50; act 2) and idealised his wife, which, too, leads into question this speech. Considering these evidences along the text, the validity of the charge becomes highly dubious. Thus the drama is constructed as leading to two contrary interpretations: it reveals with determinacy neither the rightfulness nor the falsehood of his charge of his wife's idealisation; and it does not clearly support nor subvert the discourse as to the dichotomy between men and women at that time, either.

The binary opposition between men/public and women/domestic is the central issue posed in the drama. Then Goring's assertion about lives of both sexes in the final act, which consequently brings about a happy ending, would be thought as what determines this theme of the drama and more or less would resolve the problem of two interpretability in the

above-cited scene. In this scene, Goring has an altogether conventional view on the matter, admonishing Lady Chiltern:

LORD GORING

Women are not meant to judge us, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment, is their mission. . . . A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. . . .

(137-138; act 4)

This classical theory about the sexes³ seems to be supported in the drama, judging from the consequence it causes: Lady Chiltern's verbatim statement and her encouragement for Robert to continue his political life. Historical discourse also endorses this speech, for, as Erickson argues, it is "clearly reflecting the views of the mass of Englishmen of his [Wilde's] time" (142). Yet critics are not so unanimous in interpretation of this anti-feminist remark. For instance, Powell explains that Wilde, discarding the idea he held as editor of *Woman's World*,⁴ "is prepared to embrace the Victorian idea of women as creatures of vast feeling, but scant intellect, properly confined to the domestic sphere and the expression of that womanly love which bonds marriages and families" (106-107), and Worth says that Goring's opinion is "Wilde's own philosophy, of moderation and charity he expounds, though one must say, in regrettably chauvinist terms" (148). On the other hand, Eltis is of the opinion that the speech "lies at the end of a play which effectively argues for the rejection of precisely such divisions" (168), which, I think, is a far-fetched, dubious interpretation. Amongst these contrary readings, Raby observes that "[h]ow much of this kind of precept Wilde approved is open to question" (97-98). The problem of the

contrary readings such as by Powell and Eltis is that they are highly influenced by their views on the link between Goring and Wilde. Especially, Eltis's argument is based on the premise that the drama is the author's expression of feminism. The most proper way to decode the issues in a text is to see exclusively how they are presented. Yet, if any notions of its author are stripped away of interpretation, a single reading is difficult in this scene.

The stage directions, when Goring delivers the speech, say: "*Pulling himself together for a great effort, and showing the philosopher that underlies the dandy*" (137; act 4), which suggests what he says is his real view and that he is, in this respect, an anti-feminist markedly contrasted with Lady Chiltern, a member of "the Woman's Liberal Association" (61; act 2) and, as Worth puts it, a "close cousin to ViVie Warren" (138) in a sense. As I have already mentioned, considering Lady Chiltern's drastic change from her feminist character to the one to hold the quite conventional idea, whereby the happy ending is brought about to herself, the drama seems to be affirmative on Goring's anti-feminist notion. Yet, after the corruption of male political world full of desire for power and money is disclosed through the main plot, the anti-feminist view would have no value, if it is offered only as the vehicle to preserve such a corrupt society. Then the male dominant society with exclusion of feminism is foregrounded as nothing but the sordid world. The evaluation of the anti-feminist notion is here made ambiguous: if the anti-feminism sustains the corrupt public life, it is doubtful whether it should be approved. Yet the feminist idea (supposedly innocent) is not depicted as having the purgatory potential, either. As a consequence, the speech leads to two interpretability: as the advocacy of anti-feminism or, if not so positively, that of

feminism. In this respect, the drama seems paradoxical in that, as Powell says, "simultaneously it seeks to dismantle and to preserve the double standard as it applies to women" (106). This paradox may be decoded by recourse to the discourse at that time when, as Showalter says, "the male rebellion against patriarchy did not necessarily mean a commitment to feminism" (11): in the fin de siècle, one could have at once anti-patriarchal sentiments and fears towards feminism. This applies to the very attitude Goring takes in the drama: at once a radical on woman's issue and an anti-feminist. Thus, to some extent, one may see the drama as a whole reflecting such a inconsistent discourse at that time.

In this way, the binary opposition between men/public and women/domestic is not presented in a simple hierarchical way. To recognise a remark in a drama, it is sometimes helpful to compare it to the conventional idea outside the dramatic frame. For example, Robert's charge against his wife of idealisation of him would be supported at least by some traditionalists in the eighteen-nineties. Yet the statements in Wilde's drama are not interpretable by depending only on the conventions: they are conventional in a way, while the very conventional ideas are challenged or made unstable in another way. As Gillespie says: "Wilde adopts a both/and creative posture that allows him to move freely among various aesthetic conventions, never limiting his work to the prescriptions of a particular system but continually drawing upon a range of perspectives loosely united as Victorian sensibilities" (10). Robert's charge might be supported from the viewpoint of convention, while his manner makes its content suspicious; Goring's anti-feminism also might be conventionally supported, while the drama as a whole makes it dubious. *An Ideal Husband* dexterously offers the opposing perspectives,

presenting the antithesis for interpretation. Mingling one with the other opposing element, it evolves itself in the indeterminate constitution. The drama leads to the ending accompanying much ambiguity. Then our next concern will be the way the drama ends.

At first sight, the ending of *An Ideal Husband* seems to be applicable to the nomenclature as the happy ending, but it is not so definitive. I will then illuminate the ambiguous nature in the ending and further the generic problem involved.

The drama ends happily on the surface: Robert Chiltern's getting a seat in the Cabinet; Goring's engagement with Mabel; Lady Chiltern's reaffirmation of love to her husband. Among these incidents, first, the reward to Robert is a central and problematic issue. A contemporary critic, William Archer, was suspicious of his character: "The excellent Sir Robert proves himself one of those gentlemen who can be honest so long as it is absolutely convenient, and no longer" (174).⁵ From a moral point of view, it seems to be natural that Robert should withdraw from the government, as he himself is once about to do, and that course was, in deed, conventional in the theatre at that time, as Powell with many examples indicates: "Frequently such plays end with the guilty husband not only repenting, but atoning for his misdeed by 'taking the Chiltern Hundreds'—official jargon for resigning from Parliament" (98). Powell, as a consequence, sees in Robert's fortune Wilde's resistance to "not only a set of generic conventions, but the domestic authority of woman" (98), implying that Wilde is affirmative of Robert's reward, whereas Bird thinks that Wilde contrived this outcome with "having his tongue prominently in his cheek" (148). Yet the drama is not composed in the way which leads easily to a single interpretation.

Certainly Robert is depicted as an unfaithful politician

through the representations of his readiness to comply with Mrs Cheveley's order or his self-justification in the scene I cited before, which, though, has its own ambiguity for interpretation. Yet, against these proofs, there is a contrary fact to show his faithfulness that he denounces the fraudulent Argentine Canal Scheme before he gets rid of Mrs Cheveley's intimidation. Besides, considering the nature of Mrs Cheveley, one can regard Robert even as a hero who strives against an enemy and beats her. Then the reward for such a struggle seems to be natural, and Powell's interpretation comes to hold acceptability. Yet the drama presents an element which brings about suspicion against him in the scene where the very evidence of his faithfulness is indicated. As Caversham reports, Robert denounced not only the Argentine Canal Scheme but "the whole system of modern political finance" (119; act 4), the system from which he gained the great profit and on which his life has been established. One can here perceive that he is tolerant of his past, but strict to other politicians' corruption. Thus his unfaithfulness is foregrounded, just when his faithfulness is revealed. If one takes the drama as a whole, as Bird says, as the criticism to "the basic hypocrisy of English society" (149), Robert's reward holds an ironical and castigating sense: as Bird continues to say, the drama seems to demonstrate that "the great secret of public success is simply never to be found out" (149) and that a corrupt politician can do anything if he appears to be faithful with the oratorical dexterity. Besides the fact of Robert's misdeed, the drama represents the political world as something commercial and away from integrity and the innocent domestic world. Considering these contrary evidences, the outcome to Robert is perplexing: whether it indicates the ironical or the happy ending is not revealed in a clear way. Aware of this, Worth

moves her perspective from this issue to Goring's engagement: "The play moves to the happy ending which, as always in Wilde's comedies, is deeply equivocal. For Lord Goring and Mabel . . . the outlook is fine. We may see this couple as embodying Wilde's ideas on how to live life for the best" (149). Yet this outcome is also equivocal. At first, there arises the problem as to Goring's character. Though sometimes a man of integrity, he is depicted chiefly as a dandiacal person, inverting and subverting the conventions. In the scene where he proposes to Mabel, however, he is diminished to a conventional wooer, saying: "Mabel, do be serious. Please be serious" (125; act 4). Then he gets to hold incongruity. Powell touches the issue: "what can we make of a dandy . . . who ends the play by choosing a domestic life in preference to any other?" (105). His engagement does not take place in the inverted, dandiacal world: marriage is the withdrawal into the conventional, the very establishment in the drama he has just ridiculed. In the same way, the effect of the utterance by somewhat subversive Mabel that she wants to be "a real wife" (144; act 4) seems to be reduced by the response by conventional Caversham that "there is a good deal of common sense in that" (144; act 4). In terms of their relation to convention, the prospective life of this couple is on the same level with the Chilterns they have made a contrast with. Their critical standpoint, if any, given to them by their contrast with the Chilterns is nullified, and they become nothing more than the adherents of the convention. If they are happy, it would be attributed in part to Goring's choice of domestic life: they can lead a happy life, if the corrupt public world is entirely kept out. In this point, the drama suggests that the public and the domestic life cannot be interdependent, and that innocence/women (and effeminate men) should be confined in the latter. At any rate, Goring's

engagement foresees never the ideal life as Worth puts it, but it indicates nothing more than the ambivalent attitude towards the convention: the affirmation of it with doubt and instability as to the dichotomy between the public and the domestic. As Innes observes: "Each of Wilde's comedies ends with the reassertion of moral standards. . . . Yet by the time these 'happy endings' are achieved, everything they stand for has been discredited" (217). Goring's engagement in deed denotes the maintenance of the conventional world made more or less unstable.

Although Wilde's drama is equivocal in its ending in this way, the happy outcome on the surface, matched with the light tones as a whole, allows it to be called comedy in the sense that "the materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest and amuse us" (Abrams 27). Yet some elements of Wilde's dramas are very close to those of Ibsenite problem plays. The theatre in the fin de siècle underwent some drastic changes after Ibsen's and other European dramas were introduced there. *A Doll's House* was first performed in 1889, and nine more of his dramas were produced in the West End in the next ten years. As to the influence by such dramatists, Booth argues: "It [the impact of this avant-garde work] forced dramatists to think freshly about their art, . . . enlarged the thematic material of the stage in the direction of family tragedy and social corruption . . . and finally made the unhappy ending in domestic drama acceptable to audiences. . ." (173). As is often argued, Wilde's dramas are suitably attuned to the expectation of his audience. The seemingly happy ending of *An Ideal Husband* would demonstrate this view. Yet his dramas obviously deal with the disturbing matters in contemporary society. As to their subjects or elements, they have some similarities with the problem plays: woman with a past in each

way like Mrs Erlynne, Mrs Arbuthnot, and Mrs Cheveley figures in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* as Nora and Paula respectively, though such was the stock character in the society drama, too (Rowell, 107-109); Mrs Arbuthnot's vacillation between acceptance of and extrication from convention resembles the attitude Helena Alving takes in Ibsen's *Ghosts*; Mrs Erlynne's abandoning "a mother's feelings" (80; act 4) is reminiscent of Nora's leaving her husband and children. Especially, *An Ideal Husband* would most suitably belong to the problem play, dealing with the political corruption and the double standard in sexual matters, and has been referred to by some critics as one of the Ibsenite dramas: Worth, detecting the affinity between the drama and Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*, states that "Wilde is closer to Ibsen than to the French predecessors" (131); Powell analyses in detail the similarity of two dramas (81-88); Eltis, also taking up these two dramas, says that "Wilde's satire is harsher than Ibsen's" (149).

In Ibsen's lesser-known drama, *Pillars of Society*, performed in an English theatre in 1889, the central character as a pillar of society, Karsten Bernick, is threatened with disclosure of his past that he put his own scandal to his friend, Johan Toennesen, in order to restore his then declining business. He is, as Robert, "the cornerstone of our community" (111; act 4) and "the model citizen" (112; act 4) in Roerlund's words. In this drama, however, the protagonist urged by Lona Hessel finally confesses his past in public, though whether he will resign public office or not is open to interpretation at the ending. In the case of Wilde's drama, the guilty protagonist even gains a seat in the Cabinet, his secret disclosed only to his wife and friend.

The way the drama evolves may be related to the

expectation of the audience, for, as Gillespie says, the dramatists in the eighteen-nineties might have had to take into account both "the Victorian audience's conventional anticipations of what it would encounter at the theater and that same audience's reconception of theatrical protocols based upon the emerging influence of newer forms" (82). The process of solution of the problem that Goring traps Mrs Cheveley into giving up threatening Robert is taken as the vehicle not to make the drama a radical problem play. This kind of evasion was not uncommon amongst the English dramatists. As Jackson argues: "Compared with Ibsen and Strindberg . . . the British authors now seem timid and reactionary, hinting at problems, vaguely suggesting the possibility of a radical solution but rarely pushing matters to it, and indeed, sometimes resorting to sleight of hand to avoid controversy" (xviii). *An Ideal Husband* obviously reflects this trend: hinting the political corruption and the sexual inequality, yet withdrawing into the dominant ideology with reinforcement of the dichotomy between men/public and women/domestic.

Then his dramas are neither the problem plays nor the comedies in their definitive senses. As Brooks and Heilman say of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde's dramas are "unusual in that he deals with a social problem in the witty style generally associated with the comedy of manners . . . rather than in the solemn manner that one often finds in a problem play" (81). *Pillars of Society* does not offer a clear solution at the ending, yet at least it neither ends in a happy way to the protagonist, whereas Robert is happy within the drama. Furthermore, the happy outcome is brought about by his wife's conversion of her mind to the conventional opinion that a man's life has more value, a opinion quite contrary to that of Nora in Ibsen's drama. In this sense, Wilde's drama is a far

cry from the problem play, but is a kind of melodrama in the sense that "escape from the danger is characteristic process."⁶ This sort of heterogenousness in his drama may be reflecting the generic promiscuity the theatre at that time generally held. As Booth observes: "the Victorian theatre is a veritable potpourri of dramatic forms, and it is no longer possible to make the sort of clear genre definitions for the nineteenth century. . . . Comedy also carries much of the thematic burden of melodrama and drama" (179). *An Ideal Husband* with equivocality even in its ending is problematical in terms of its genre. It is, as it were, a mixture of melodrama, problem play, and comedy. The most suitable appellation would not be beyond the society comedy in the sense that it deals with the social matters with jovialities or "problem play" in the sense applied to some of Shakespeare's dramas.

An Ideal Husband evolves itself with dynamics of indeterminacy, which is also found in its ending. As a consequence, the genre of the drama becomes problematic. It is obviously "a veritable potpourri of dramatic forms." Through the whole course of drama, it represents an absolutely equivocal world, providing the elusive perspective.

Wilde's dramas contain various elements to bring about perplexity to interpret them definitively. Powell's argument that in Wilde's dramas "[w]hat begins in cliché . . . finishes in upset of expectation, in paradox" (4) explains the discrepancy between the first three acts and the final. Gagnier argues that his dramas are strategically composed to be interpretable in two ways: "a sentimental for his audience and a cynical interpretation for his critics" (125). Gillespie, too, indicates the interpretive multiplicities in Wilde's oeuvre. All of these arguments are persuasive respectively, yet they do not fully

explain the ambiguity in Wilde's dramas. Powell's view explains the discrepancy only between the earlier acts and the final, and the arguments both of Gagnier and Gillespie are limited in that they resolve their pluralistic or multiple nature through the audience in a different way: the former clearly divides the reactions by the upper-class audience and the critics, while the latter focuses his attention mainly on the middle-class audience, who offers, in his words, "a fairly broad commercial base" (81), in spite of his awareness of the heterogeneousness of the audience in the late Victorian theatre.

The audience in the period, if categorised simply, consisted of two classes: "Diamond and white ties might sparkle in the stalls, but the pit and the gallery were filled with loyal supporters from the old Victorian audience" (Rowell 104), that is, the working-class people in a broad sense. In such a circumstance, it is not easy to make it clear to whom Wilde's dramas were directed, and if one dares to generalise the reactions, it is inevitably to be prescriptive for their variety within the categories based on the class origin or the social stereotypes. Although the audience might have influenced Wilde's dramas, I do not dare to guess the possibility but only to declare that the equivocality is concerned with constructive matrices in the texts, for, though I analysed the equivocality only on the level of the plot in this paper, its causes are also attributed to other elements such as dandy's linguistic system and the representation of the characters in general, of which I have difficulty in discerning the audience's influence.

An Ideal Husband does not offer a perspective to the thematic issues, making them interpretable in the antithetical ways. Some passages or manners seem to present a single view, while others negate it offering the opposing view. Both views

are sustainable, while neither are clearly affirmed. The ending is also interpretable in two ways so that the drama as a whole becomes highly equivocal. Wilde's dramas are not so simply decoded such as those of the assertions of the dandiacal amorality or attitudes the author would affirm. Rather, to use Gagnier's phrase, they show the "Janus faces" (117), and are essentially ambiguous. As Jackson says:

Like the figure called "Oscar Wilde," they [Wilde's dramas] are the work of an author who enjoyed discords more than resolutions . . . ; a writer for whom "all interpretations [are] true and no interpretation final" and who consequently denied his plays a simple, unequivocal "meaning." (xxxv)⁷

The equivocality is actively produced in the text. With the poetics of diversification, the drama made a definitive interpretation impossible. *An Ideal Husband* is the text that absorbs in itself the equivocality to present an entirely uncertain world, and as far as one sees the binary opposition between men/public and women/domestic, it simultaneously supports and subverts the Victorian ideology. I have not traced in this paper its formative causes pertaining to the author or some discourses enclosing him, yet it is clear that this dialogicality is the very essence *An Ideal Husband* (and I believe other works) holds.

Notes

1. The text I use is: Russell Jackson, ed., *An Ideal Husband* (London: A & C Black Limited, 1993). All passages cited are from this edition. Stage directions are described in italics.
2. I am indebted to Kaplan and Stowell for these comments by the contemporary critics, 28.
3. The affinity between Goring's assertion and a section of Ruskin's "Of

- Queens' Gardens" has been pointed out. See Eltis, 163-164, and "Of Queens' Gardens," 121-123, section 68.
4. Wilde as editor of *Woman's World* wrote a review in 1889 of *Darwinism and Politics*: "The cultivation of separate sorts of virtues and separate ideals of duty in men and women has led to the whole social fabric being weaker and unhealthier than it need be" ("Some Literary Notes" in *Woman's World*, May 1899). I am indebted for this citation to Eltis, 166. Powell also cites some passages (85-86).
 5. A review of this sort is seen in the *Era*: "He [Robert] wanted money, and so he betrayed his trust; and when he thought he was in danger of being found out and exposed he was very uncomfortable. . . . But we are not asked to cultivate a fellow feeling with the sordid rogue. . ." (*Era*, 5 January 1895). I am indebted for this citation to Powell, 104.
 6. A definition by Brooks and Heilman in "Glossary," 45.
 7. "Introduction" to *An Ideal Husband*. The citation is from "The Critics as Artist," 153.

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